Men On Boats

Written by Jaclyn Backhaus.
Directed by Yining Shang ’25.

October 31, November 1 and 2, 2024 8:00pm in the Powerhouse Theater.
Senior Project Members include: Kaila Dunn ‘25, Madelyn Ockner ‘25, and Yining Shang ’25.

Sponsored in part by the E.J. Safirstein ’83 Memorial Fund. Presented through special arrangements with Dramatists Play Service.

Cast

John Wesley Powell: Madelyn Ockner ’25.
William Dunn: Mariah Jones ’25.
John Colton Sumner: Abby Bettencourt ’25.
Old Shady: Kaila Dunn ’25.
Bradley: Grace Fure ’27.
O.G.Howland/Johnson: Leila Stark ’26.
Seneca Howland/Just Jim: Zoe Polinsky ’27.
Frank Goodman/Mr.Asa: Frederica von Siemens ’25.
Hall: Ailynn O’Neill ’26.
Hawkins: Solstice Lauren ’26.

Production

Faculty Advisor: Hannah Gaff.
Director: Yining Shang ’25.
Scenic Designer: Tania Barrenechea.
Costume Designer: Laurel Obermueller ’26.
Lighting Designer: John Miley ’28.
Sound Designers: Senior Project Team.
Stage Manager: Cecilia He ’28.
Dramaturg: Kaila Dunn ’25 and Madelyn Ockner ’25.
Assistant Scenic Designer: Jonathan Eccher-Mullally ’27.
Movement Coordinator: Hannah Gaff.
Fight Captains: Kaila Dunn ’25 and Leila Stark ’26.
Scenic Crew: Arthur Beaugeard ’27, Nora Guzikowski ’27, and Harper Navin ’26.
Costume Run Crew: Catalina Arias Vasquez ’27 and Katie Brady-Gold ’26.

Run Crew: Sam Andrews ’25, Will Luber ’27, Ellis Rubin ’26, and Maria Shansonga ’27.
Light Board Operator: Hadley Boyle ’25.
Sound/Projections Board Operator: David Ding ‘25

Drama Department Faculty and Staff

Director of Theater: Christopher Grabowski.
Costume Design: Kenisha Kelly.
Scenic Design: Tania Barrenechea Barreda.
Production Manager: Patience Haskell.
Technical Director: James Hunting.
Costume Shop Manager: Leigh Davis.
Acting/Movement Coach: Hannah Gaff.
Dramaturgy: Amanda Culp.
Publicity/Box Office/Front of House: Joan Gerardi.

Drama Department Interns

Production Management: Maggie Young ’25.
Production Management Assistant: Ananya Agrawal ’26.
Stage Management: Yining Shang ’25.

Drama Box Office Staff

Assistants: Miriam Barker ’27, Sophia Fredericks ’26, and Benjamin Sayres ’28.
Drama Department Photographer: Jove Leonard ’27.

Ushers

Reg Barton ‘27, Devan McCarthy ‘28, Maeve McGrath ‘27, Maria Pozdniakova ‘28, and Sam Rutledge ’28.

Special Thanks:

The ensemble would love to thank Jaclyn Bachaus for visiting Vassar College and meeting with the production team in person, also Ki’tsai Zangpo, Liz Dahmen, Carina Jiang, Yuchen Zhou, TA16, Xinlin Yu, Xiaonan Ji, Beijia Li, CSC, M&W.

About the Playwright

Jaclyn Backhaus (she/her) is a playwright, screenwriter, & educator hailing from Phoenix, Arizona. Her Off-Broadway plays include OUT OF TIME (NAATCO and The Public Theater, dir. Les Waters), WIVES (Playwrights Horizons, dir. Margot Bordelon), INDIA PALE ALE (Winner, 2018 Horton Foote Prize, MTC, dir. Will Davis), MEN ON BOATS (Clubbed Thumb, Playwrights Horizons, dir. Will Davis), and YOU ON THE MOORS NOW (TRE, dir. John Kurzynowski). Her work for TV/film includes DOULAS, a half-hour comedy pilot about birth workers in New York City, PREETI POPPED IT (written with Mahira Kakkar and Purva Bedi), a Punjabi-American road trip comedy that was selected for last year's 1497 Features Lab, and ORACLE, an hourlong metaphysical drama set in the Sonoran Desert. She is one the core members of The Kilroys, a professor of playwriting at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and a creative director at Fresh Ground Pepper, an artistic process lab in NYC. She was the 2016 Tow Foundation Playwright-in-Residence at Clubbed Thumb and is currently a New Dramatists resident playwright. Her work in theater and for the screen centers the multigenerational impact of South Asian diasporic immigration to America, and many of her works examine the intersection of underhistoricized people and known historical timelines. She has several projects in development in film, tv, and theater.
Jaclyn Backhaus's Website

Director's Note by **Yining Shang '25**

I come into this play with a deep attachment to this whole team of explorers. I breathe with them, I yell with them, and I cry with them (by which I mean they probably didn't cry, but I do!) For me, they are the group of people you stay up very late with when finishing a group project. They try to have fun on top of all the desperation. Sometimes they argue, sometimes they fight, and sometimes there are just too many voices in a room but it doesn't impact the fact that they are whole in unity and together they face anything.

I appreciate the fact that I got to know who they are in this show before I understood who they are in history. They are flawed characters, of course: limited by their understanding of the world, the mindset of society at the time, and the dreams they want to realize in this expedition. However, on top of all the things that happened to them (and all the things that they did), you get to understand that they are very real people that have been living and breathing like any of us do.

They are also, from another perspective, a miniature of US society by the time of 1869. They are a very concentrated version of society's curiosity and drive to impose influence over the "West", a group of executors of the government's Manifest Destiny, and of course, an implicit version of colonialism. They set foot, as first-comers, on this land that has long been resided and known by people who are NOT them and were not seen as part of them.

I understand and must acknowledge that as the director of this play, I come from the perspective of someone who did not grow up in the US and does not identify as Native American. I started learning about the westward expansion primarily through this play (despite taking AP US History during COVID). I am in no place to comment on this part of the history of this country and what damage these characters and the government behind them have actually done to groups and groups of people. But I come from a place where I understand that the transcontinental railroad, the one this group took to get to Greenwater Wyoming where they start their journey, was built with the blood and sweat of 12 thousand Chinese immigrants. I come from a place, identifying as part of the BIPOC community, trying to look back on the history of this nation and understand what it means when we talk about "minority" and "oppression".

And that's why, to take Jaclyn Backhaus' words, while we know "the characters in MEN ON BOATS were historically cisgender white males [,] the cast should be made up entirely of people WHO ARE NOT". This is US taking back our narrative from people who have been owning it for way too long. This is US asking you to think about your life and your perspective and realize how limited and confined they are. This is US asking you to open up your mind's eye and realize how this world has always been rotten and mealy like an apple. This is US asking you the question Powell is asking Dunn, "DO YOU REALLY WANT A LEGACY LIKE THAT".

Now, on top of everything that's been said(ahem ahem), we want you to laugh and enjoy the show. We want you to have fun like we had fun in the process of creating this. This is a piece about history and beyond history. This is a piece about us trying to seek jokes and joy amidst the sorrow of everything that happened in the past. This is us inviting all of you to a trip to the Grand Canyon and, to quote O.G. and Seneca, the "cliffs and mountains beyond".

~Yining Shang '25

Decolonizing Vassar: Living the Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that Vassar stands upon the homelands of the Munsee Lenape, Indigenous peoples who have an enduring connection to this place despite being forcibly displaced by European colonization. Munsee Lenape peoples continue today as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community in Wisconsin, the Delaware Tribe and the Delaware Nation in Oklahoma, and the Munsee Delaware Nation in Ontario.

This acknowledgment, however, is insufficient without our reckoning with the reality that every member of the Vassar community since 1861 has benefited from these Native peoples' displacement, and it is hollow without our efforts to counter the effects of structures that have long enabled—and that still perpetuate—injustice against Indigenous Americans.

To that end, we commit to build and sustain relationships with Native communities; to expand opportunities at Vassar for Native students, as well as Native faculty and other employees; and to collaborate with Native nations to know better the Indigenous peoples, past and present, who care for this land.

~Vassar College website

Upcoming productions

Ghost Sonata

By August Strindberg, translation by Evert Sprinchorn.
Directed by Ella Talerico ’25.
November 21, 22, 23, 2024.
The Martel Theatre.
8:00 p.m.

Barbecue

By Robert O’Hara.
Directed by Taylor Reynolds.
February 27, 28, & March 1, 2025.
8:00 p.m.

Mr. Burns, A Post Electric Play

By Anne Washburn.
Directed by Christopher Grabowski.
April 3, 4, 5, 2025.
The Powerhouse Theatre.
8:00 p.m.

Steerman Playwriting Series

By Drama student playwrights.
Faculty Coordinator Peter Gil-Sheridan.
April 23, 24, 25, 26, 2025.
The Martel Theatre.
8:00 p.m.

26th Annual Marilyn Swartz Seven ‘69 Playwriting Award

April 26, 2025.
The Martel Theatre.
2:00 p.m.

Contacts and Website

Box office email: boxoffice@vassar.edu.
Phone Number: (845) 437-5599.
Website: Drama Department Website.
Instagram: Drama Department Instagram.
YouTube: Drama Department YouTube.